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Eſſay on RIDICULE, WIT *and* HUMOUR.

By WILLIAM PRESTON, *Eſq*; *M.R.I.A.*

PART THE SECOND.

Read Jan. 10, 1789.

HAVING conſidered the nature of ridicule, and traced out the ſources of the pleaſure which attends it, let me, for a moment, advert to the corporeal external expreſſion of that pleaſure, I mean *laughter*, and endeavour to inveſtigate its phyſical cauſe, ſo far as it is an expreſſion of *mirth*, or a *corporeal movement* indicating *pleaſure*. I ſpeak with this reſervation, becauſe, as I have already, in ſome meaſure hinted, *laughter* is not always expreſſive of *mirth*, no, nor even of a pleaſurable ſenſation; *laughter*, when produced by tickling, is expreſſive of *pain*; in choleric perſons it is expreſſive of *anger*.

MR. Burke, in his Eſſay on the Sublime and Beautiful, takes occaſion to conſider the mechanical or phyſical cauſe of *pleaſure* in

in general. He is of opinion that it is produced by a certain relaxation of the frame, and reaſons very ingeniouſly in ſupport of this theory from the nature and conſtitution of thoſe objects that communicate pleaſure. " Beauty (ſays this ingenious writer) " acts, by relaxing the ſolids of the whole ſyſtem. There are all " the appearances of ſuch a relaxation; a relaxation ſome- " what below the natural tone ſeems to me to be the cauſe of " all poſitive pleaſure *."

Now, to apply this principle to the *phyſical cauſe*, or *animal mechaniſm* of *laughter*. The ſlight blemiſhes, imperfections or miſchances, the ſmall deviations from order, ſymmetry and decorum, that are the ſubjects of *ridicule*, and excite *pleaſure* through the medium of *contempt*, reſting in qualities, actions or things in themſelves *light* and *trivial* (they could not elſe be the objects of *contempt)* have ſmall *momentum*, either with reſpect to *individual preſervation* or *ſocial happineſs*, and of courſe excite no very violent *emotion* of the *mind:* While the ſtronger paſſions, love, fear and anger, wake, and range abroad, to guard the exiſtence of man, to continue his ſpecies, or connect him in leagues of civil union; the lighter feelings, like mirth for inſtance, enliven and embelliſh familiar intercourſe with ſportive charms and fugitive graces; or poliſh and correct it with minute decencies and mutual obſervances. Where the mind is but ſlightly affected, no great degree of *relaxation* is induced. The due ſecretion of the humours is but little diſturbed, and no very violent acceſs of *animal ſpirits* is thrown on the breaſt, far leſs than is requiſite

* Eſſay on Sublime, p. 163, § on the phyſical cauſe of love.

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to produce the ſenſe of weight, that feeling bordering on pain, which accompanies our enjoyments of a more exquiſite degree. The pleaſure attending *mirth* being, comparatively ſpeaking, faint, the relaxation of the nerves muſt conſequently be inconſiderable. The due ſecretion of the humours is but little interrupted; the acceſs of animal ſpirits to the breaſt is trifling; barely ſufficient, not to overwhelm, but ſtimulate the nerves; and, by a certain mild irritation, to produce that agreeable convulſion called *laughter*. That *irritation* is the immediate cauſe of *laughter* is evident, from involuntary laughter being produced by *tickling*, which can only operate by irritating the nerves. That the *irritation*, in the caſe of *mirth*, proceeds from an extraordinary afflux of humours may be inferred from this, that violent and long continued *laughter* is always attended by an evacuation of humours in the form of *tears*. That the emotion of the mind, of which *laughter* is an expreſſion, does actually produce ſome *relaxation* of the frame, and that the nerves are indeed *irritated*, may fairly be collected from our experience, that involuntary *laughter* is incident to hiſterical patients, in whom the nerves being weak and irritable, an uneven and interrupted ſecretion is produced by their weakneſs, and perpetually aſſails their irritability. That *laughter*, when expreſſive of *pleaſure*, expreſſes but a *pleaſure* of a faint and ſubordinate kind, is manifeſt from its taking place ſo early in young children. It is obſervable that infants not many days born laugh; they even laugh in their ſleep long before they are ſuſceptible of mirth or ſorrow, even before they begin to ſhed tears. In that early ſtage, before the nerves have gained their tone, or the organs learned their uſe; before the creature pays any attention to external

nal things, laughter ſeems to be its uniform, indeed its only expreſſion of pleaſure or delight, from whatever cauſe. That pleaſure muſt be merely animal, and if we conſider the dulneſs and imperfection of the child's perceptions, we may well ſuppoſe it to be of a very faint and ſubordinate kind, perhaps produced by ſome external cauſe, that mildly irritates, and ſtimulates his nerves.

I PROCEED now to trace out the ſources of the ridiculous; and I think all its objects, various as they ſeem to be at firſt glance, may be found in one or other of the following claſſes:

FIRST. Thoſe actions and geſtures of the brute creation, which imitate the actions and geſtures of man. Here the reſemblance leads to a compariſon with ourſelves, the compariſon produces a ſenſe of comparative ſuperiority, that ſenſe of ſuperiority a triumph, and that triumph is expreſſed by laughter. Theſe imperfect and groteſque imitations, by the brute creation, are a ſort of practical *caricatures* of human actions; or, as Mr. Addiſon very juſtly expreſſes it, the actions of beaſts, which move our laughter, bear a reſemblance to a human blunder. This ſource of the *ridiculous* is but ſcanty, and the pleaſure derived from it of a ſubordinate degree. The inferior creatures that imitate man are not numerous; and the human actions, which they are competent to mimic, are but few. The reſemblance is generally remote, often rather fanciful than real; and, as the diſtance is ſo wide, and the inferiority ſo palpable, the comparative triumph, and the pleaſure reſulting from it, will be proportionably ſmall.

SECONDLY.

SECONDLY. Slight corporeal blemiſhes and defects are the next ſource of the *ridiculous*, to which we are led by an eaſy tranſition from the former; Cicero himſelf tells us—*eſt etiam deformitatis & corporis vitiorum ſatis bella materies ad jocandum*; but this muſt be taken with the reſtriction I have already mentioned, that the defects and blemiſhes muſt not prevent the perſon from enjoying the pleaſures, or performing the functions of life. They muſt not include the ſuppoſition of cauſing pain; they muſt not be ghaſtly or offenſive to the ſight; for in ſuch caſes they would cauſe in us not mirth, but pity, diſguſt or averſion *. To this claſs we may refer *caricatures*, and other burleſque paintings, and many dramatic characters where much of the pleaſantry is drawn from the corporeal peculiarities of the perſonage introduced; as, for inſtance, the Falſtaff and Bardolph of Shakeſpear, the Corbacchio of Ben Johnſon.

THIRDLY. Unforeſeen diſaſters or miſchances, which are no way tragical, nor of a ſerious nature; as, for inſtance, ſhould a beau dreſt out for an aſſembly fall in the dirt, or a blaſt of wind hurry away a fine lady's cap and artificial treſſes: Here the accident excites our triumph, by a miſchance from which we are exempt; and there is no collateral affecting circumſtance to call in the graver emotions of humanity, and check the riſing contempt. Under this head we may include practical jokes, a never-

* I know not whether I ſhould refer to this or the foregoing head, that mirth which ariſes from tracing out ſome reſemblance to the brute creation in the form and lineaments of man; and from ſeeing or hearing human creatures imitate the motions, noiſes, and other actions of brutes.

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failing ſource of merriment among the vulgar; ludicrous paintings, like the *Enraged Muſician*, *Hints for bad Horſemen*, and other productions of *Hogarth* *, and his ſchool; and moſt of the laughable ſituations and comic incidents in dramatic and other humorous writings.

FOURTHLY. The laſt and principal ſource of the ridiculous is an incongruity or inconſiſtency in the words and actions, and as far as they can be traced or are notified to us, in the thoughts of men. This fund of ridicule is by far the moſt copious, from the infinite diverſity of objects which it comprehends; and it excites a ſpecies of mirth more refined and pointed, becauſe the triumph being over man himſelf, in ſomething peculiar to him as ſuch, is more full and complete than that over the brute creation, or man with reſpect to external accidents; and in this we recognize the admirable contrivance of providence. For this is the branch of ridicule which has the moſt important influence on the conduct of life and manners, and therefore it is deſtined to affect us the moſt forcibly. This laſt ſource of the ridiculous may be ſubdivided into ſeveral members. I do not propoſe the following diſtribution as ſtrictly logical and ſcientific, but it may ſerve well enough to explain the ſubject.

FIRST. Incongruity between the words, actions or ſentiments of a perſon, and his phyſical ſituation; that is to ſay, his corporeal accidents of youth, age, beauty, deformity, ſtrength,

* I cannot mention the name of that excellent ſatiriſt and moral painter without expreſſing my admiration of his ſkill in depicting life and manners.

weakneſs,

weakneſs, ſickneſs, health. When a very young man, for inſtance, talks in a ſtyle of dogmatical gravity; when an old decrepid wretch conceals his years, and boaſts of his youth and vigour; when a ſtrong Herculean fellow aſſumes the dreſs of a petit-maitre, and affects to liſp and amble; or ſome diminutive and feminine form would, with the military garb, put on the menacing brow and martial ſtride; all theſe abortive attempts to aſſume a quality which the perſon does not poſſeſs are as fair ſubjects of laughter as a monkey when he imperfectly mimics the actions of man. The incongruity ſtriking us excites the idea of relative imperfection; the ſenſe of our own ſuperiority, in this inſtance, produces an inward triumph, and this triumph is expreſſed by laughter.

But here it may be objected, and I ſhall once for all anſwer the objection, that laughter is ſometimes produced where no idea of relative inferiority is impreſſed, no triumph excited. In ſupport of this objection we are referred to the inſtances of witty drolls, and facetious perſons, who, though capable of acting with the utmoſt decorum and accuracy, fall into voluntary blunders and ſtudied ſoleciſms, merely to entertain their companions; and of performers on the ſtage, who repreſent clowns, and other low and abſurd characters. To this I reply, that both the jeſter and the player exhibit to us a fictitious character; we laugh rather with them than at them; not at what they really are, but at what they would ſeem to be; the firſt emotion excited by blunders and improprieties is contempt: This is the impreſſion of the moment; it is not until afterwards, and on reflection, that we perceive the imperfection or abſurdity to be merely affected,

and that the jeſter plays the fool or the blunderer for his own and our amuſement. We are moved to laughter in preciſely the ſame manner by the real blunders and *groſſiêrté* of a country bumpkin, and by the repreſentation of a ſkilful actor, who exhibits ſuch a character on the ſtage; in the firſt feelings there is no difference whatſoever, but this is the illuſion of the drama; in the ſequel, and on reflection, we deſpiſe the abſurdity and ignorance of the clown, and admire the ſkill and addreſs of the player. So that the whole argument turns on the overlooking a circumſtance very obvious to be ſeen, namely, that affected imperfection or incongruity excites only a tranſient and momentary contempt, whereas a ſimilar emotion of a permanent duration is excited by that which is real. In ſhort, whether we laugh or weep at the drama, our emotion is excited, not by the real, but aſſumed perſon and character of the actor before us; and the affected blunderer in company is, in that inſtance, an actor; and on the ſame principles we may explain the effects of *irony*. Where a perſon ſeems to poſſeſs an opinion, or aſſert a fact the very contrary of what he means to eſtabliſh; this is a ſort of intellectual acting, or playing a feigned character. We diſtinguiſh in a moment between the real and effectual aſſertion or opinion of the perſon.

Secondly. *Incongruity* between the manner of ſpeaking, acting and thinking, and the civil or political ſituation of the perſon; a departure from the decorums of character and propriety of acting conformable to rank and ſtation; as if a grave perſonage, a ſtateſman or philoſopher, ſhould be diſcovered riding on a hobby-horſe;

horſe; or a great monarch be ſurprized at the unkingly paſtime of playing taw, or catching flies. Yet even ſuch mean and ridiculous actions as theſe (which confirms the preceding theory) may be qualified and ennobled by collateral circumſtances. Socrates was not aſhamed to be caught in ſome ſuch ſituation; nor would it degrade even a monarch, in the eye of wiſdom, ſhould he be found, in a moment of paternal tenderneſs, playing at taw among his children.

UNDER the foregoing head we may include ſuch characters as the Parſon Trulliber of Fielding, the ambitious cobler mentioned in the Spectator, who contrived to gratify his pride by framing the figure of a beau in wood, who kneeled before him in a ſuppliant poſture; female pedants, and ſmall politicians. From this fund of the ridiculous are derived the *mock heroic* or *parody*, and the low burleſque. The *mock heroic* repreſents mean agents, and low characters ſpeaking the language which common uſe has appropriated to the auguſt and exalted; *parody* applies the very identical expreſſions which had been employed on ſome great and ſolemn occaſion, and by an exalted and dignified perſonage, to ſome vulgar and little incident. The low burleſque, on the contrary, repreſents exalted perſonages engaged in mean purſuits (as, for inſtance, Dido building an *houſe of eaſe*) and uſing the dialect of the rabble. It is remarkable that theſe two ſpecies of compoſition, although they ſeem to differ ſo widely in their genius, produce their effect, *laughter*, by the very ſame ſort of incongruity.

THIRDLY.

THIRDLY. A departure from the manners, language and cuſtoms of the age and country, or even of our own peculiar claſs in life, profeſſion or province. The rude and vulgar every where are diſpoſed to laugh at the peculiar habits and cuſtoms of foreigners; and even the polite and liberal, who have learned from an extenſive commerce with the world the precept of Horace, *nil admirari*, could ſcarce reſtrain their mirth were they to ſee a modern Engliſhman dreſt in the ruff of Queen Elizabeth's day, and hear him talk in the dialect of Spenſer, with his antiquated words, *eftſoons*, *yclept* and *whilome*. Every nation has that degree of predilection for its own cuſtoms and manners, that it ſuppoſes a departure or variance from them to be an inſtance of inferiority, and to ſhow a want of refinement or of underſtanding. The difference of garb is found to have a ſtriking effect on the human mind; even in the ſame country and nation, the reſpect which individuals pay to each other is, in ſome degree, regulated by an attention to dreſs; the mutual contempt and antipathy which ſometimes ſubſiſt between nation and nation are very much ſupported and kept alive by the difference of habiliment. Under this head we may claſs the travelled coxcomb and fop, who affects to renounce the garb, language and manners of his own country; and ſcenes of low humour, that turn on national peculiarities and prejudices; or profeſſional modes of thinking or ſpeaking, as the characters of Frenchmen, Teagues, ſailors, lawyers, ſo frequent in comedy; and on this principle it is that the ſimple repreſentation of humble life ſometimes excites mirth.

FOURTHLY.

FOURTHLY. A diſparity between paſſions and their objects, between means and their ends, which ſtand forth in human life, and excite contempt under the denomination and form of foibles and abſurd opinions. It were endleſs to adduce examples of theſe, they are multiform and various as the purſuits and actions of man; ſuffice it to ſay, that every paſſion, when carried to exceſs, impreſſes us with the idea of incongruity, and conſequently of relative imperfection; and ſo does every palpable diſproportion between the end and the means, on which ſide ſoever the deficiency or inferiority falls, and will excite laughter by contempt; provided, however, that there is nothing of ſerious affliction to the agent himſelf, or ſerious damage or danger to other perſons, which may call forth emotions of a more vigorous character and a deeper hue.

WERE I to ſearch for a portrait which at once combines in itſelf and illuſtrates all the different forms of the ridiculous abovementioned, I ſhould inſtance that of Don Quixote; his words and actions do not accord with his phyſical ſituation, for with his ſingle arm he would rout armies and overthrow giants; nor with his civil and political exiſtence, for he pretends to overthrow empires, diſtribute kingdoms, and confer titles and honours. His dreſs, his arms, his notions, his phraſeology, are not of the country or age in which he lives; his paſſions, love and honour, for inſtance, are in exceſs, and their objects mean and contemptible; the ends he propoſes are extravagant, and the means he employs are inſufficient; all theſe form ſuch a tiſſue of incongruity, unqualified by any tragical circumſtance or incident, as

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is truly comic ; and they are heightened by ſlight corporeal defects, and called out and illuſtrated in a variety of croſs adventures and petty misfortunes.

For the ſake of perſpicuity I ſhall rank BLUNDERS IN SPEAKING AND ACTING in a diſtinct claſs of the ridiculous, being the fifth, of what I ſhould call the intrinſically ridiculous, or incongruity in the words, actions or thoughts of men. Yet this is but a baſtard claſs; for it will appear, on examination of every individual circumſtance belonging to it, that they may be referred to one or other of thoſe preceding.

Though I have hitherto conſidered and treated the ſources of the *ridiculous*, as if ridicule were ſomething ſtable and certain, nothing in fact can be more variable and fluctuating in its nature. Things appear ridiculous or not according to the education, courſe of life, conſtitution and temper of the obſerver, which vary his notions of propriety, perfection and order on the one hand, and of indecorum, defect and incongruity on the other. Virtue, religion, truth, honour, every thing ſerious and venerable, have and daily do become ſubjects of ridicule among certain unhappy claſſes of men. The vulgar will laugh at many coarſe jeſts and indelicate alluſions, while perſons of a more happy education and refined taſte will be ſhocked at ſuch mirth as inhuman and indecent. One man may receive as facetious obſervations what would offend his neighbour as daring impieties ; but wherever a laugh is produced it invariably proceeds from

from the conſcious triumph of ſelf-ſuperiority, either real or imaginary.

The variable nature of ridicule may ſerve to convince us that *ridicule* cannot be the *teſt* of *truth*; a *teſt* ſhould be independent and ſubſtantive; *ridicule* depends in a great meaſure on the temper and diſpoſition, the education, endowments, acquiſitions, habits, and purſuits of the obſerver; *truth* is univerſal and invariable; but were *ridicule* the *teſt* of *truth* the ſame identical propoſitions would be *true* to one man and *falſe* to another.

Mr. *Brown*, in his eſſays on *Shafteſbury*, has laboured, and at ſome length, to ſhow that *ridicule* cannot be the *teſt* of *truth*, becauſe it is a mode of *eloquence* tending to affect and agitate the mind; as much a mode of eloquence as the ἐλεεινον, the pitiable or pathetic; and his reaſoning is concluſive; but this point may be demonſtrated in a few words, and I think with a mathematical ſtrictneſs: *Ridicule* cannot be the *teſt* of *truth*, for being a branch or mode of the imitative arts, it preſents, as that name imports, a picture of ſome object, and cannot be the *criterion* of that of which it is only the *repreſentation*. 2dly, The *ridiculous* not only conſiſts in the repreſentation of a picture, but it is a ſingle poſitive picture; there is no relative view, no collation of two objects; but to the exiſtence of *truth* or *falſhood* the collation of two objects is neceſſary. 3dly, The perception of *ridicule* is inſtantaneous, the perception of *truth* or *falſhood* is a progreſſive operation of the mind. A propoſition muſt be formed; the ſubject and predicate of this propoſition

muſt be compared, and from this compariſon the underſtanding collects their agreement or diſagreement. This progreſſion takes place even in propoſitions called *intuitive*, that is to ſay, where the truth or falſhood is perceived without the intervention of proofs or means. Now, if *ridicule* were the teſt of truth, the perception of the *ridiculous* and the perception of *falſhood* would be one and the ſame, and would in every caſe be not *progreſſive* but *inſtantaneous*.

But I find I have tranſgreſſed the limits uſually preſcribed to papers of this kind. I ſhall therefore conclude for the preſent; but may perhaps reſume theſe topics at another day, and offer to this ſociety, as the ſubject of a future communication, ſome reflections on *Wit* and *Humour*.